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Founder of the Vatican Library: Nicholas V or Sixtus IV?

David Mycue

The Vatican Library, historians agree, came into being during the last half of the fifteenth century. The date of that event and the name of the founder depend upon what historian one reads. Since most historians credit either Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455) or Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484), this paper will delve into the motives both popes had to establish the Library and the actions that they took to bring it about.[1] Is it possible that the Library had two founders within a generation?

That the papacy possessed no library worthy of the name when the Renaissance began will surprise few, once they recall the destructive invasions of the early Middle Ages and the feuds of powerful Roman families thereafter.[2] Owing to losses during the 1300s, when the headquarters of the papacy had been located in southern France, Pope Eugenius IV (1431-1447) possessed only 340 books,[3] which Nicholas V inherited upon Eugenius IV's death. Nicholas enlarged the collection; for that reason, as well as his being acknowledged as the first Renaissance pope, most historians have termed him the founder of the Vatican Library.[4]

If he deserves that title, his motive for establishing the Library is clear: his love of books. Nicholas, as Tommaso Parentucelli Sarzana, was born into poverty and grew up while his parents were in exile. His father died when he was nine, but Tommaso's mother kept him in school, for he was something of a prodigy. He became a master of arts at eighteen; then did private tutoring in Florence

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until he had earned enough money to return to the university at Bologna, where he earned a doctor of theology degree while working part-time as a servant of the bishop of Bologna, Nicholao degli Albergati.

Recognizing the young man's ability, Bishop Albergati employed him to manage the Albergati household. Shortly thereafter, the bishop ordained Parentucelli as a priest; and when Albergati received a position in the foreign relations department of the Vatican, Father Parentucelli went along. For many years afterward, Albergati acted as a papal emissary throughout western Europe, although he was often so ill that Parentucelli had to perform many of his duties. When Albergati died, Pope Eugenius appointed Parentucelli to the bishopric of Bologna, but kept him at Rome, where his talents deeply impressed the pope. As a reward for high-quality work, Eugenius made Parentucelli a cardinal nine months after he had become a bishop. Less than a year after that promotion Eugenius died, and the college of cardinals voted Cardinal Parentucelli to succeed him.[5]

As Pope Nicholas V, he immediately began doing what he said he would do if he were wealthy—buying books and constructing lovely buildings. While working his way through college he had met the Florentine banker Cosimo de' Medici, who employed him to draw up a booklist for a library that Cosimo was building as part of the Dominican monastery of San Marco in Florence. The booklist achieved great respect among bibliophiles as the San Marco library gained recognition as the best in Italy. Consequently, the list became the basis for private collections of nobles in several Italian city-states, where the wealthy, to offset the stigma of usury and to display their riches, were promoting numerous cultural activities. Library building, as a result, was becoming a fad in fifteenth-century western Europe.[6]

Enthroned on St. Peter's chair, Nicholas expanded his youthful hobby of book collecting into a major Vatican enterprise. Under the direction of his longtime friend Fiorentino Vespasiano da Bisticci, a Florentine bookseller, book scouts from the Vatican scoured Europe for manuscripts while intellectuals throughout Italy were hired to copy manuscripts, to translate Greek works into Latin, to write new works, or to give public lectures on the liberal arts.[7] Rome swelled in an intellectual ferment during Nicholas V's papacy. As those activities proceeded, Nicholas added the accumulating manuscripts to the existing collection.

While he developed his library plans, he kept the rare books in his bedroom; the rest he placed in eight upright bookcases in a

nearby room. Although his love of expensive binding later led to charges that his motivation was that of an aesthete, a dilettante, or an antiquarian, his appointment of Giovanni Tortelli as his special librarian offers another view. Up to then, and ever since 1318, the title "librarian of the pope" had been held by the pope's personal confessor, always a priest of the San Augustin order, who merely cared for the pope's prayerbooks. Nicholas continued the tradition, but the official librarian kept doing the same job while Tortelli worked on the library collection.

Before Nicholas V's papacy, Tortelli had earned a high reputation among academics for having compiled a dictionary and for having translated lives of the saints from the Greek. He was busy inventorying the growing number of books in the Vatican Palace when Nicholas died in 1455, his library plans still on the drawing-board even though they had become his top priority project during those final years. It would have been "a wonderful work could he have accomplished it; but, forestalled by death, he left it unfinished," mourned Vespasiano.[8] Tortelli soon found himself relegated to the position of a minor Vatican functionary, which he remained until his death in 1466.[9]

If founders are those who originally conceive of an idea, whether or not they carry it out, then Pope Nicholas V was a founder, as were other popes before him. His colleague, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II (1458-1464), thought that Nicholas had tried to accomplish too much, and thus left numerous projects undone.[10] Nevertheless, the forces motivating Nicholas to institute a Vatican Library require analysis. True, personal inclination and the prevailing culture of humanism played a share in Nicholas's motives, yet the papacy of Pius II casts doubts that they were the main factors. Pius never finished the library project, nor did he take an interest in the collection.

On the surface, his unconcern appears curious. Before becoming pope, he had been a more famous humanist than Nicholas; and after reaching that high office, Pius did not abandon humanism. He not only retained most of the humanists working for the Vatican, but hired more, among them Bartolomeo Sacci de Piadena Platina. Pius valued good books and collected them with as much relish as Nicholas. In doing so, Pius built a considerable private library, but he did not contribute his books to the papal collection as Nicholas had done. Instead, Pius willed them to his family, which—three hundred years later—sold many of them to the Holy See. Pius had been born to a family of great landowners in the village of Corsignano, which he renamed Pienza in his own honor

after using papal resources to build in its center several large buildings, including a private residence for himself, and to restore the declining fortunes of his family. Years later, his nephew, upon becoming Pius III (1503), converted the Pienza cathedral chapter-house into the Piccolomini Library to preserve his uncle's books.[11]

When Nicholas was dying, he told friends why he had devoted so much energy to promote learning as a major papal policy. It was, he explained, actually a public relations stunt. Through it, he hoped to restore the influence of the Catholic church after its decline in prestige. The power of the church had evaporated before he had taken office, and spiritual concerns were being ridiculed in Renaissance Europe. All that was left was for the pope to take the lead in the revival of learning to channel it into proper directions.[12]

Whatever the merits of such a policy, the three popes who followed him saw no need to continue it. During the next sixteen years, the collection received no new accessions, and many of its volumes disappeared. Following Nicholas as pontiff, Calixtus III (1455-1458), a Spaniard and the first Borgia pope, disliked Rome and its culture. Although well-read in his youth, he was very old when elected pope. Vespasiano considered him senile, a report that one may discount; but it is clear that Calixtus was ignorant of affairs beyond his expertise as a canon lawyer.

When, as pope, he first viewed Nicholas V's books, Calixtus exhibited amazement that many were encased in rich bindings. The only books that he had previously seen had been bound in canvas covers and written on linen that had been stitched together. Complaining that Nicholas had squandered the patrimony "of the Church of God" on books, Calixtus, according to Vespasiano, threw away the Greek ones while giving others to his friends and servants.[13] Nevertheless, humanists at Rome, some of whom were pleading with Calixtus to value the library, continued to prosper during his short reign and during the next one under Pius II, when humanism, if not library-building, was surely looked upon with a fond eye. Humanists, by this time, had become an integral part of the papal bureaucracy. They had evolved into a new class at Rome, divided from the nobles and clergy, yet mingling and influencing both.[14]

It was, therefore, a shock to Vatican humanists when Pope Eugenius's nephew, Pietro Barbo, succeeded Pius II as Pope Paul II (1464-1471). Although he was occupied as a Venetian businessman when his uncle was elected to the papacy, Barbo at once felt the call to the priesthood. His rise in the church hierarchy was,

predictably, rapid. As pope himself, he dismissed nearly all the Vatican humanists in an economy move. Paul II's hobby was collecting rare gems, not books. "He was," recalled Platina, "a great enemy and despiser of human learning, branding those for heretics that gave their minds to it. . . . "[15] Clearly, Platina disliked Paul, who had fired him from the position that Platina had obtained under Pius II. For acting as a leader of the dismissed humanists, Platina was jailed twice by Paul, whose troubles with the disgruntled group ceased when he died of a heart attack on 28 July 1471.[16]

The subsequent election of Francesco della Rovere as Pope Sixtus IV proved a great blessing for humanists. Della Rovere, like Pope Nicholas, came from a poor family; according to some accounts his father was a fisherman or a cloth trader, but the facts about his background are obscure. As a boy, Francesco entered the Franciscan order, obtaining a doctorate in 1444. Twenty years later, owing to his talents in oratory and writing, he rose to the generalcy of the order, much through the help of the scholarly Cardinal John Bessarion, who in the 1450s had chosen Father della Rovere as his personal confessor. The men became close friends, forming with like-minded scholars what might be termed an underground study group during Pope Paul II's anti-intellectual pontificate. Owing to Bessarion's recommendation, however, Paul named della Rovere a cardinal of the church in 1467.[17] Four years later, as pope, Sixtus ordered Vatican officials to reassemble Nicholas V's collection. He then issued a papal bull excommunicating anyone who did not return within forty days books belonging to the church.

Vespasiano hailed Sixtus IV's reign as opening a new epoch for humanity. On 17 December 1471, Sixtus commissioned architects to construct a Vatican Library. He planned that it would adjoin the Apostolic Palace, but his numerous projects to renew decaying Rome soon raised so many complications that he suspended the Library building plan. Whatever the reason, the suspension remained in effect until 1475, after the death of Bishop Giovanni Andrea del Bussi, who, as a priest of the San Augustin order, had held the honorary title of librarian of the pope. Bussi was a classical scholar, and his scholarly work (together with his efforts to promote the new art of printing) proved too intense to permit him the energy for pushing through the Library construction.

About three weeks after Bussi's death, Sixtus broke tradition by nominating to the vacant post Platina, a layman, who, together with Sixtus, had been a member of Bessarion's study group.[18]

Four months later, on 15 June 1475, Sixtus officially appointed "Bartholomeum Platinam scriptorem et familiarem nostrum" as papal librarian. The same day, Sixtus issued his bull *Ad Decorem Militantis Ecclesie*, the actual birth certificate of the Vatican Library. In that bull, he promised that the Vatican treasury would from then on permanently finance maintenance of the Library. He also directed Platina to supervise the project, work that began at once along with cataloging the collection by subject and alphabetically by author. The result was the first library catalog of the papal collection, since all previous booklists had been drawn up to document the monetary value of the books for the benefit of the papal treasury. Platina also received orders from Sixtus to oversee the restoration of ancient manuscripts and the transcription of new manuscripts. To accomplish all that, Sixtus put Platina in charge of the library custodians.

Sixtus's strong directives inspired humanists, but—as usual with grand enterprises—financial realities intervened, forcing him to cancel plans to construct a special building for the Library. He established it, instead, in a series of rooms located in a basement wing of the Vatican Palace. Nicholas V had erected the wing for another purpose (the storing of grain and wine) and, perhaps, had one of the rooms decorated for reasons yet unknown. Thus in a way Nicholas was unknowingly the builder of the Vatican Library.[19]

The physical work of turning the basement into a library began in September 1475 and was completed during 1481, but the Library had been open to the public for some time before. As opposed to the few dozen humanists who had been privileged to consult Nicholas V's books, under Platina's administration the register of the Vatican Library is replete with names, many of whom would achieve scholarly renown during the sixteenth century. Platina's lending regulations were lenient; even tourists in Rome could borrow books.[20]

Why did Sixtus do it? There is little doubt that he hoped to establish the best library in Italy. He had been deeply influenced by humanistic circles in Italian universities, where he had taught theology before joining the general staff of the Franciscans. Humanists applauded his efforts as the library project went on.[21] Though some historians do not rank him as a humanist, he achieved a "vast reputation" among humanists. He was well aware of the worth of libraries.[22]

That point can be graphically illustrated. Close inspection of the Vatican Library interior reveals that it is similar to a library built

by Domenico Malatesta Novello at Cesena, in Romagna, during 1452. Malatesta ordered it constructed as part of a Franciscan monastery, which General della Rovere probably visited later during his inspection trips. The influence of the Cesena library, called the Malatestiana, grows even clearer through other sources. Upon ascending the papal throne, Sixtus appointed as his physician Giovanni di Marco, who in 1473 gave his books to the Malatestiana. Previously, Marco had been the official town doctor of Cesena and personal physician to Domenico Malatesta.

Marco's passion for books may have been a spark that initiated Sixtus's library plans, just as Marco's ideas certainly were critical in motivating Malatesta to establish the library not only for the monastery but also as a town public library, permanently endowed by Malatesta in 1464, a precedent, perhaps, for Sixtus IV's similar action for the Vatican Library a decade later. As a close friend of Cosimo de' Medici, Malatesta had modeled the Malatestiana on the library of San Marco after Nicholas approved building the Cesena library in a May 1450 bull. The connection between the libraries of San Marco, Cesena, and the Vatican is close for both popes, Nicholas and Sixtus.[23]

The Franciscan influence on Sixtus to found the Vatican Library does not end with the Malatestiana. Ironically, the religious order founded under rules that its members could not own, or even read, books was soon transformed by Francis of Assisi's successor, Bonaventure, into an order of book lovers. The necessity to compete with the Dominicans and to preach effectively led, in the 1300s, to the library at Assisi becoming the grandest in Italy. Popes in that period often deposited in it valuable books from the Vatican; the Assisi library thus served as an unofficial papal book depository. Elsewhere, Franciscan libraries grew so large that other prelates, such as the bishop of Durham, England, Richard Aungerville de Bury, complained that the Franciscans were monopolizing books. Nicholas V had spurred the growth by threatening, in a 1451 edict, to excommunicate a citizen of Assisi if he did not turn over to the order certain books that had been donated. Sixtus IV, in 1472, granted two hundred years' indulgences to all who contributed books or helped repair the Assisi library. And it was Sixtus, significantly, who canonized Bonaventure.[24]

The fact that Nicholas intended to establish a Vatican Library is no reason to credit him for having done so. His dream for it never came close to partial achievement. Thinking and willing do not constitute the act of founding. Sixtus not only revived the dream but carried it out. Sixtus commanded that the manuscripts be set

in order under professional guidelines, and he set aside a place for the preservation of written material. Only Sixtus guaranteed the collection a steady flow of funds. Platina, by all accounts, acted as a true library administrator. He was the first to receive the title "librarian of the Holy See" after he had worked some time under the more humble designation "librarian of the pope." Following his death on 21 September 1481 and up to the mid-1500s, people referred to the institution as the Sistine Library. Conversely, Tortelli was not a librarian; he was a scholar employed to inventory manuscripts on a short-term basis.[25] Even after Platina's death, Sixtus continued to support the Library; for example, he appointed another librarian within a month of Platina's death in the bull *Romanus Pontifex*, which renewed all the guarantees, and he greatly increased the custodians' income.[26] Nicholas created no institution; he merely willed his books, about 1,200, to the Vatican collection, which—under Sixtus—rose to 3,650 volumes.[27]

Could the motivations of either Nicholas or Sixtus be discovered from sociological analysis? Both popes were from the lower class; and, not having grown up in a family mansion, they looked upon the Vatican as home. Other popes during the Renaissance were raised in palaces, probably much better than the run-down Vatican. Both Nicholas and Sixtus tried to beautify it, to impress upon it their own personalities, as one does with one's home. Nicholas left his books to the Vatican rather than to his family. Sixtus did likewise.

Sixtus's background is so vague that historians have speculated that he was ashamed of it. As a young man, he had befriended a family who, though unrelated and living in another town, used the same surname as he. While climbing the ranks of the church hierarchy along with the well-to-do, who made up the largest segment of clerical leaders, Sixtus and the Rovere family began considering themselves related. He looked upon them as his adopted loved ones. When he needed a coat of arms to keep up with his colleagues, the Rovere family was glad to grant the favor to their strong, intelligent adopted uncle. Later, he made several of their members cardinals. One of them may have caused the suspension of the Library project in 1472 by convincing Sixtus that his library ought to be a private one located within a family mansion that the cardinal was constructing, but that work ended when the cardinal died suddenly in 1474. The Vatican, as time went on, became Sixtus's true home.

Though historians consider his motives political—to overawe his subjects by carrying out stupendous projects—certainly choices

other than library-building would have been simpler and perhaps more effective. The one class that would have been impressed were the humanists, hardly an influential group, as Paul II's open disdain of them demonstrated. If Sixtus's motive were ostentation, he would have discontinued the entire project when it became evident that funds were insufficient for erecting a grand building for the Library and that a basement would have to do for the collection. That Sixtus's heart, as opposed to cold calculation, was in the Library project is indicated by his granting indulgences for the benefit of the Assisi library and by his founding of another library in Rome within the chapterhouse of St. Peter's basilica, an effort that would have done little to increase his prestige or to intimidate the masses. The Vatican Library was not Sixtus's "showpiece." It was, rather, his home piece.[28]

Both Nicholas and Sixtus overcame their backgrounds; few popes during the Renaissance, or later, arose from such circumstances. Most, like Pius II, took pride in their deep family roots. Until Nicholas became pope, it was traditional for papal collections to be considered the personal property of the incumbent. Nearly always, they were willed by pontiffs to their heirs. Despite the example set by Nicholas and Sixtus, they were unable to break that tradition. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Vatican collection grew very slowly; many Vatican officials appropriated for themselves the church documents and manuscripts they handled. Private libraries throughout Italy still house materials that once belonged to the Vatican.[29]

Nicholas and Sixtus knew that their blood relatives would have appreciated neither the contents nor the intellectual value of books. After the reigns of those popes, however, the wealthy regained the papal throne, and their families valued the written word. The Vatican Library is an accident of birth, the birth of two men into the ranks of the poor and their rebirth in the Vatican Palace, which cried out for the comforts and the atmosphere intelligent people prefer to be surrounded with: knowledge in its physical form, a library to share, the living thoughts of the great minds of the past. The Vatican Library is the product of the most wonderful gift of the Renaissance to the modern world—human love, with which both Nicholas and Sixtus were filled.

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